

# Party over for 'Guitar Hero,' but not music games

The Associated Press

"Guitar Hero" made ordinary people feel like rock stars, and its plastic guitars have redefined how people consume music and entertain themselves at house parties for the past half-decade. Yet its demise hardly marks the end of music games.

The video game genre remains popular; it has just evolved. Many people these days play music-inspired games on the iPhone, such as "Tap Tap Revenge," and dance games designed for Microsoft's Kinect motion-sensing controller, which hit stores just last fall.

With sales declining, the company behind the iconic "Guitar Hero" games decided it couldn't justify churning out new versions that weren't selling as well as they did in their heyday just a few years ago. Activision Blizzard Inc. said Wednesday it will halt development on the franchise, which made its debut in 2005.

"Guitar Hero" doesn't require any real music skills, just some hand-eye coordination. Would-be rock stars tap color-coded buttons on fake guitars in time with chords that appear on the screen. Players can pick from a broad selection of songs, with some versions, such as "Guitar Hero: Metallica," playing tribute to specific bands or genres. The games offered social entertainment before "social" became a technology buzzword, and at the height of their popularity even gave music sales a boost.

Activision's decision to shutter "Guitar Hero" comes less than two months after Viacom Inc., the media conglomerate that owns MTV, sold the money-losing development studio, Harmonix, behind the "Rock Band" franchise. That game lives on for now.

But the future of Harmonix could lie in "Dance Central," one of the most popular and well-received games for Kinect. The game, which needs no controllers of any kind, has players follow increasingly complex choreographs to songs like Lady Gaga's "Poker Face" and Salt -N-Pepa's "Push It." It might just be the next big thing, just as "Guitar Hero" was five years ago.

"When music games first came out, they were a revelation. It was like nothing anyone had ever seen," said Scott Steinberg, CEO of video game consulting company TechSavvy Global. "They essentially helped make gaming more social, more affable to new audiences."

At one point, the games were even seen as the savior of the music industry, because they got a generation weaned on video games buying music again. "The Beatles: Rock Band," which launched with much fanfare in 2009, was seen exposing the iconic pop band to a whole new audience.

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Though it sold well, the game didn't live up to lofty expectations that painted it as almost the second coming of the Beatles.

"Companies took advantage of a moment in time to cash in on the craze," Steinberg said.

This, he added, might have hastened the demise. The game makers put out new versions of the games each year, expecting them to sell better each time. Activision added "Band Hero" and "DJ Hero" to the fold, the former focused on a younger, family-friendly crowd and the latter on players more into turntables than arena rock. "Rock Band," meanwhile, spawned "Lego Rock Band," "Green Day: Rock Band" and others.

In the U.S., "Guitar Hero" sales reached \$2.47 billion as of the end of 2010, according to the NPD Group, a market research firm. Sales of the "Rock Band" property, meanwhile, hit \$1.28 billion in the U.S. In comparison, Activision's "Call of Duty: Black Ops," which went on sale last November, made \$1 billion worldwide in six weeks.

Sales fizzled in the past couple of years, weighing down the entire video game industry. Sure, people are still playing "Rock Band" and "Guitar Hero," rocking out in dens and living rooms around the world. Bars even hold karaoke nights with patrons playing the games instead of singing into a traditional karaoke machine.

But playing does not equal buying. Once you've shelled out \$150 for a game and the attached instruments, you probably won't do it again next year. While the games sold without instruments too, and extra songs have been available to download, this wasn't enough to keep the games' momentum going. New choices popped up.

"Tap Tap Revenge," an addictive iPhone game that has players tap tiny balls in time with music, has been downloaded more than 50 million times, in all its iterations. Some versions are free, others cost 99 cents, with extra songs available for sale, generally two for \$1. The Walt Disney Co. bought the game's maker, Tapulous, in July.

Bart Decrem, Tapulous' co-founder, called the demise of "Guitar Hero" a "bummer, because in many ways (the game) started it all." But the world is changing. Instead of buying \$50 games to play on game consoles, many people have turned to cheaper, bite-sized iPhone games and to "FarmVille" and its various copycats on Facebook.

"Tap Tap Revenge," which recently launched its fourth version, shows no signs of slowing down, Decrem said. The game even briefly overtook the runaway hit "Angry Birds" on Apple's free app store after it launched Dec. 20.

"Music games, rhythm games, have been around since sticks and logs," said Stephen Jacobs, associate professor of interactive games and media at Rochester Institute of Technology. "(They) are not going away by any stretch of the

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imagination. But like with many 'new' games, when you are lucky in the industry you hit a chord, you hit a moment, and you are the thing. And that moment generally only lasts for a brief moment in time."

Cliff Elion, president and creator of Simi Valley, California-based "You Rock Guitar," said he wasn't entirely surprised to learn of the end of "Guitar Hero." His game is inspired by "Guitar Hero" but seeks to bridge the gap between video games and real music by teaching people how to play real guitar.

"'Guitar Hero' targets people who imagine they are guitarists. We are targeting people who want to become guitarists," he said. The audience for real-life guitar is likely smaller, though; Elion wouldn't disclose sales figures, though he said the company is growing.

"The emotional power of music is huge," Decrem said. Though "Guitar Hero" may be playing its last song, Decrem said music is far from being in a crisis.

"Certain business models around it are in crisis, whether that's "Guitar Hero" or selling MP3s," he said. "It's incumbent on us game makers, people who love music and technology to invent new entertainment experiences that get people connected to music and build a business around it."

Shares of Activision, which is based in Santa Monica, California, fell 94 cents, or 8 percent, to close at \$10.75 on Thursday. The decline was due to a disappointing earnings outlook from the company, which has a history of beating analysts' expectations.

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